MURAL PAINTING FROM THE AMERICAN
POINT OF VIEW. 

BY CHARLES M. SHEAN

The walls of great public buildings, here as elsewhere, in the future, as they have done in the past, will afford the painter his greatest opportunities. As the noblest themes excite the noblest endeavor, the subjects and events proper for pictorial expression in our public monuments will develop and command the highest powers of our greatest artists.

It is then on wall paintings, public and accessible to all, that we may most hopefully look for the development of a national art.

Now, unfortunately, in popular estimation, the easel picture in its gilded frame and shadow box is more often held to be the highest and most precious manifestation of the painter’s skill.

People with no knowledge of the history of art, or whose knowledge is superficial, often tacitly assume that other forms of painting are the productions of practitioners of an inferior order, and that the work of the gold frame genius, suitable for the parlor and exhibition gallery, only calls for serious criticism and attention.

Curiously enough, this view of what constitutes “high art” is also not unusual within a certain class of painters.

The judgment of Michelangelo regarding easel pictures is as true to-day as when he made his historic and uncomplimentary comment; although the general practice of easel painting by artists now has the sufficient excuse of necessity.

It is almost their only medium of expression.

Our monumental art is still in its infancy and relatively few wall paintings have been executed here.

But the knowledge of the requirements and limitations peculiar to mural art and of its relation to its architectural surroundings shown by American artists, as well as the almost uniform excellence of their work, is surprising when one considers how rare have been their opportunities to practise this difficult and exacting branch of their profession.

It is also surprising and not particularly gratifying to find on examination that many of these paintings show few indications of an American point of view, or of what must be the character of the future decoration of American public buildings.
THE BARTER WITH INDIANS FOR LAND IN SOUTHERN MARYLAND

Center panel of mural painting for Baltimore Court House, ten feet high by eight feet four inches wide. Size of entire work ten by sixty feet. Copyright C. Y. Turner, 1892
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All do not sin in this respect; there are exceptions, and the exceptions are important.

Monumental art in this democracy can never be a toy for the rich, nor will it ever be a field for the exploitation of studio reminiscences and echoes of the old classical and academic art of Europe.

It must have for its base the broad support of popular pride and appreciation. This, the condition of its existence and full development will, in the end, control its tendencies and govern its choice of subjects.

It is obvious that the nationalization of public decoration, necessary and vital, if it is to be a living force, will receive efficient aid and guidance from the many active and public-spirited “patriotic societies” scattered throughout the Union. The movement, too, can count on the steady assistance and championship of the various municipal art societies.

Our people, as a whole, are still absorbed in other matters, and a general appreciation of mural art remains to be developed, and an effective, popular support remains to be secured.

Only a small proportion of our population and a smaller proportion of our public officials show any interest in the embellishment of our public buildings by painted decoration, or have any desire for it, yet, in spite of the present conditions, the outlook for mural painting in America is not without encouragement.

An acquaintance—imperfect, it is true—with the character and intention of the decoration of the great state buildings of Europe is steadily spreading, and is begetting a desire for better things here. It is not confined to tourists and students of interior architecture alone, but has become the common possession of most readers of publications on art.

Even among busy and practical people having no predilection for paintings, there is an awakening to the idea, that it is not an intellectual work to make the interior of a monumental building one vast area of marble slabs and machine made carvings, ignoring all pictorial records of the history, scenery and industries of the locality in which the structure is placed, or that such a result is especially creditable to the taste and judgment of the community responsible for the undertaking.

Although the artistic condition of most of our buildings affords little ground for complacency or pride, it is wiser, when considering
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their present state, to have as few illusions as possible and to seek the facts as they exist; not forgetting that a change is taking place and that the change is for the better.

It is an unpleasant truth that, with few exceptions, our commercial semi-public and public buildings are now "architectural monuments," pure and simple, and the credit for whatever is artistic on or in them can be conceded to the constructive designer. Outside or in, sculpture is barely represented, unless conventional figures, cartouches and carved ornament, almost always innocent of originality, are to be regarded as sculpture, and in them the work of the trained figure painter or the ornamentalist, unless of the commercial variety, is conspicuous by its absence.

Their poverty in mural work, either in paintings, glass, or mosaic, is little realized, nor is their inferiority in this respect to buildings of like character in Great Britain or on the continent fully understood, until a comparison has been made, and the comparison when made is liable to give an American food for uncomfortable reflections.

Our great railway corporations do not make the waiting rooms of their terminals picturesque and interesting by decorative paintings of the scenic beauties and views of the cities along their lines as the Paris and Lyons Railway has done on the magnificent new Gare de Lyon at Paris.

We are credited with many Anglo-Saxon characteristics, and possibly the somber gloom or eye-trying brightness of our halls of waiting exist for a purpose; not avowed and perhaps not felt.

The writer of an appreciation of the late George Frederick Watts, which has recently appeared in "The Architect," a London publication, in the course of his article, says: "He was willing, at his own cost, to paint the vast wall spaces in Hardwicke's terminus hall at Euston, which looked as if they were intended for that purpose, but railway managers are opposed to loiterers in stations and the offer was declined."

Our insurance companies erect buildings on which no expense is spared, except on things artistic. The sum expended on repetitive and trivial carvings on one costly structure in New York City, had it been wisely spent on mural work, would have made it unique among the office buildings of this or any other country.

In Newark, however, a building of this class contains a most
successful and important ceiling by one of our best men, and stained
glass windows by another. In the business section of New York, a
similar building has its main entrance hall enriched by a monumental
mosaic, and its law library by a series of appropriate paintings. An-
other of our foremost men has a wall painting on the staircase hall of
one of the newer Nassau street buildings.

Mural painting, simple and severe, dealing with the history of
banking and exchange or with the form of commerce peculiar to the
institution—as in a bank at Pittsburg which has panels treating of the
iron business of Western Pennsylvania and the grain fields of Ohio,
the two sections from which it draws the bulk of its business—would
dignify the counting rooms of our great financial institutions.

In their place, we find costly marbles, elaborate wood carvings,
and lavish gilding.

The citizens of no American city feel a greater pride in the emi-
nence, wealth, and power of their municipality or are better acquaint-
ied with its development and history than the citizens of Chicago.

Here the directors of a great bank prescribed the history of the
growth of the city for the decorations of their banking room, and
commissioned an artist of reputation to execute them. The series is
long and important. Beginning with the wintering of Père Mar-
quette, at the mouth of the Chicago river, and with old Fort Dear-
born, and running through the homely beginnings of a western town
up to the commanding present of the great modern city. The paint-
ings excited and still excite unfailing popular interest.

While a few other banks and office buildings have decorations, the
list is short indeed.

The vivifying touch of the artist, while found in rare instances, is
lacking, in the majority of cases, from our commercial buildings,
because its absence is not felt, nor its advantages recognized. The
question of expense does not account for it. Take the exteriors alone
of many buildings! Over ornamentation is common, and the cost of
the unnecessary, inefficient, and often misplaced stone carvings would
frequently more than pay for some painting or mosaic which would
lend distinction and give individuality to the building and serve as
its blazon.

This is a commercial age, yet one cannot but question the acumen
of business men who reject so manifest an advantage.

The interiors of our libraries are also silent and dead and convey
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no message, a few only excepted, and nothing in the decorations of the two best known so much as hints that we have here material for prose and poem, or that the material has been used.

The Congressional Library at Washington, beautiful as it is, and technically excellent as are its paintings, unpleasantly suggests a building given over to a group of talented and learned foreigners who have skilfully shown us how the storehouse for our national collection of books can be made attractive.

Only the painters seem to have assumed that the people whose resources furnished the means for their work, were without a history or a literature.

The wall paintings of the beautiful Public Library at Boston ignore absolutely American literary performance and are forgetful of the brilliant group of writers that gave literary distinction to the city.

In all the libraries erected through the munificence of Mr. Carnegie, not one example can be shown of decoration appropriate to his gift.

In contrast to these the Governor Flower Memorial Library at Watertown, New York, now nearing completion, will be a typical example of a building devoted to public uses whose walls record and illustrate.

Under the direction of the decorative architect responsible for the interior, a series of panels has been executed representing scenes from the past history of the neighborhood, making this library notable among the buildings of its class.

It is an interesting fact that the scenes recorded in the paintings of this building relate to a single county of this State, and the list of appropriate and available subjects was by no means exhausted.

Compositions of great excellence and artistic beauty by some of our ablest artists are to be found in American hotels and theatres, and in addition to their primary and proper function here of enrichment, they serve to accustom and educate the public to the use of wall paintings.

The National Capitol is a place above all others whose paintings should be a remembrance and an incentive to patriotism; whose walls should speak in grave and measured tones of the country's past.

It is the place above all others from which compositions, whose sole aim and function is to please by line and color, can best be spared.
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Fortunately, we find in the Capitol at Washington a series of paintings appropriate to their surroundings and imbued with the spirit of lofty endeavor; whose motive and inspiration is American.

Works that, however lacking in mural qualities they may be, clearly indicate, if they do not show, the manner in which public decorations should be conceived, and that have in addition a real and positive value as the foundation stones of the American school of mural painting.

Our men are now perhaps better taught, better trained and wiser in craftsmanship than their predecessors, but in the purpose and intention of public art, they can still learn many a sober and serious lesson from the old painters of the Rotunda. Vanderlyn's "Landing of Columbus," Powell's "Discovery of the Mississippi," Weir's "Embarkation of the Pilgrims," Trumbull's "Declaration of Independence," and the rest are enduring memorials of their authors, as well as guide posts on the road to a National Art.

Between the yesterday of the Rotunda paintings and to-day, little of like character exists. But American historical painting, after a period of neglect, is struggling to its feet and again many of our artists are seeking their inspiration in the history and tradition of their own land; leaving to the old in spirit and the feeble in invention the long array of well worn and over-used allegories and personifications, characterless figures of no particular age or clime, and bending their energies to depict American endeavor and achievement.

The list of works recently finished, under way, and projected, is not long, and is being all too slowly increased. But the movement has life, is gathering strength and forging ahead. A few examples can be readily recalled. The new Court House at Baltimore, through the initiative and partly at the expense of the Municipal Art Society of that city, has been enriched by a series of wall paintings of the first importance, treating subjects based on the history of Maryland. At Boston, one finds in the State House new paintings relative to the history of the Commonwealth. In the aldermanic chamber of New York a large ceiling decoration was recently placed, and in the City Hall of Cincinnati a successful series of stained glass windows.

It is not the purpose of this article to attempt a demonstration of the relative importance, or lack of importance, of the story-telling easel picture, as compared with the canvas without a story, and which is a medium for the display of the painter's conception of pure beauty, or
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which is primarily an evidence of his technical competence or the subtlety of his color sense.

The gifted and sensitive devotees of art for art’s sake, in the quiet of their studios, will continue to produce lyrics in color and frame them in gold, and they and their poems in pigment will not be without honor, or without the condemnation of the critic.

But our wall paintings paid for by popular subscription or with money from the public treasury; on the walls of public buildings; owing their existence to public bounty, must have a purpose, decorative it is true, but higher than mere embellishment, in order to command public approval and justify the expenditure of public funds.

It is a safe and reasonable forecast that the future great art of this Republic, as far as it is expressed in painting, will find its complete and full development on the walls of our public buildings, and that of necessity and from the nature of our institutions and because of the conditions under which it must be executed, it will be primarily a recording art.

That when American art has attained its full stature and entered into its own, it will be simple, virile and direct.

It will have emancipated itself from supernatural figures and accessories. It will speak with no foreign accent, nor be encumbered with the theatrical properties of the schools. Except as they personify the ideals of the people, it will not need for its expression the tiresome collections of classical paraphernalia: Fame with her trumpet. The winged victory. The laurel crown and the palm of victory will fade and vanish away.

The Italian Renascence was the prolific age of art production, and, in buildings crowded with paintings, it sometimes happened that the work of one great master was destroyed to make room for the work of a greater.

Paintings by Piero della Francesca and Signorelli in the Vatican were obliterated to give place to the epoch-making frescoes of Raphael; while the important wall paintings of Perugino over the altar of the Sistine Chapel were sacrificed in order to afford a field for the Last Judgment of the supreme master, Michelangelo; but no such slaughter of the innocents need be dreaded in America for many a long year to come.

Throughout the land, public buildings stand bare and unadorned,
their nakedness crying out for covering, although the material to clothe them sumptuously is all about them.

When completed and adorned in a manner befitting the wealth and importance of the American people, our painters, glass workers, and mosaicists will have made them golden records of the nation's story.

On their walls, our lawgivers and statesmen, our authors, scientists and inventors, will find fitting remembrance.

The growth of the State from the scattered and struggling colonies of the Atlantic seaboard to the Imperial Republic stretching from ocean to ocean; the sufferings and triumphs of our soldiers and sailors; the development of our varied industries will be there recorded. There, too, will be depicted the bustling life of our harbors, lakes and rivers, and landscape art will find new dignity and power in its larger field.

The greatness of America's art future is freely predicted, and prophesies abound of her coming glory.

The popular indifference to mural art is slowly passing away, and the neglect here of this form of painting which affords the noblest opportunities for artistic endeavor will not long continue. However unsatisfactory the present may be, the coming years are full of promise.

The character of much of the work recently done and now under way justifies the expectation that before many decades of the twentieth century shall have passed, our national and municipal buildings may be as richly embellished as their European counterparts, and that the work done will be American in character and worthy of the great Republic of the West.

When we want good things they will be produced for us. Silent Shaksperes and idle Angelos await our summons; they will not come at the call of hollow pretence, but when we want them so badly that we cannot live without them, they will arise to do our bidding.

Arthur Jerome Eddy
In "Delight the Soul of Art."